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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF and DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: Local Authorities Stand By As Internecine Dispute at Bat Nha Pagoda Turns Violent

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Post has received scores of calls from American Buddhists, Congressman Peter Welch and former Ambassador Andrew Young about ongoing mob violence against 400 monks from the Plum Village Lang Mai order. The violence is the culmination of a dispute that surfaced last fall and can be traced to overtly political statements critical of the GVN on a Vietnamese language website affiliated with the Plum Village Community. Local and central government officials have refused to get involved and the central organ of the Vietnamese Buddhist community - the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS) - has only recently engaged. Although the violence seems to have subsided, the monks remain isolated at the pagoda without power or water. The Committee on Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security have, to date, failed to respond to our request to meet to discuss the situation. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) There are three main pagodas that have a significant number of monks and nuns affiliated with the Lang Mai order in Vietnam - one in Ho Chi Minh City, one in Hue, and Bat Nha pagoda - the largest of the three - in Lam Dong. The Bat Nha pagoda has served as the central training facility for Plum Village followers since Thich Nhat Hanh returned to Vietnam approximately five years ago. At that time, Thich Nhat Hanh struck a deal with the head monk of the Bat Nha pagoda, Thich Duc Nghi, to allow Plum Village followers to create a center of learning within the pagoda in exchange for an \$80,000 investment in the infrastructure of the pagoda. The arrangement seems to have worked well until the end of last year when Nghi (affiliated with the officially-recognized VBS) decided that he did not want to Hanh's followers to continue to staying at the pagoda. Nghi informed us that he felt pressured by the central VBS and the Committee for Religious Affairs because Hanh's previous statements could be interpreted as critical of the Vietnamese government. Nghi was probably also influenced by a number of controversial articles posted on website of a Thich Nhat Hanh affiliate (<http://phusaonline.free.fr/index.htm>). While the Plum Village community claims the site is not an official website of the community, it prominently featured articles critical of GVN policies on a number of sensitive issues - including bauxite mining, border disputes with China, and the recent arrest of Le Cong Dinh - mixed with information about the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. It may also be that Nghi simply wanted to appropriate Lang Mai facilities without compensation.

¶3. (SBU) The dispute culminated at the end of June when local officials permitted Nghi's deputy to cut off power and water supplies to the Lang Mai order at the pagoda. A large mob of angry Nha Bat monks and local thugs stormed the facilities, burned the homes of nuns, destroyed many of the Lang Mai facilities, and beat several monks staying there. The police permitted the destruction, but prevented the crowd from entering the common area in a dormitory where Lang Mai monks and nuns sought refuge. The standoff continued for several days, with the mob chanting angry slogans demanding that those affiliated with the Lang Mai order leave the pagoda. The angry crowd receded over the last week, but the Lang Mai monks and nuns remain without power and water service. Followers have been allowed into the dormitory to provide food and water.

14. (SBU) Last week, the Lang Mai order sent formal petitions to the Southern VBS in Ho Chi Minh City asking for their intercession in the dispute. On July 5, the Southern VBS called a meeting with the Lam Dong VBS Central Committee and Nghi. Some Lam Dong VBS central committee members, including the provincial VBS Vice Chairman, were critical of the mistreatment of the Lang Mai order. Nghi pledged to restore power to the Lang Mai order but has not yet done so. Local authorities and the police still seem reluctant to intervene. On July 10, the Vice President of the Central VBS stated that he supported a cooling off period which would allow the Lang Mai order to stay at Bat Nha pagoda until September or October. After that, the monks and nuns would have to leave the pagoda and resettle to pagodas in their home provinces if an agreeable resolution cannot be found.

15. (SBU) Comment: The conflict at the Bat Nha pagoda involves a long-simmering dispute over many issues not directly related to religious freedom. The politically sensitive comments posted on the pagoda's website no doubt contributed to increased tensions but do not appear to have been the primary cause of the dispute. Nonetheless, the local government's failure to play a constructive role in mediating the dispute or indeed even to take action to restore law and order when the dispute turned violent has clearly had a negative impact on the ability of the citizens involved to exercise their basic rights, including their freedom to worship.
End comment.

MICHALAK